
Ann Heylen, *Chronique du Toumet-Ortos : Looking through the lens of Joseph Van Oost, Missionary in Inner Mongolia, 1915-1921*

“Leuven Chinese Studies XVI”, Louvain, Leuven University Press & Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation, 2004, 409 p.

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Philip Liddell

- 1 The *Leuven Chinese Studies* series, published by the Leuven Institute for Sino-Mongol Studies (LISMS), has acquired, with its growing list of monographs, a reputation for serious research. The series is published by the Ferdinand-Verbiest Foundation of the *Université Catholique de Louvain* ; it is the showcase, on a 50-50 basis, for contributions to conferences organised over the past decade by the Institute and for individual research results, some in the form of doctoral theses. The book reviewed here belongs in the second category.
- 2 The subject of the writer's research was probably suggested to her by the Institute's aims : in the publishers' exact words, these are firstly “the history of the Catholic Church in China, with missionaries' contributions to that history”, and secondly “the translation and publication—in co-operation with other centres for Mongol studies—of research carried out by the CICM missionaries” (*Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae*, the missionaries of Scheut, in Belgium, or the Scheutists).
- 3 Ann Heylen's research ought to answer this purpose, as it sets out to offer an English-language study of a *Chronicle*, written in French and hitherto unpublished, of the six years (1915-1921) spent in Inner Mongolia by Joseph Van Oost, a Scheut missionary.

Only extracts, specially chosen and arranged in thematic order, are published in this study.

- 4 The preface, written by Jérôme Heyndrickx, the series director, consists of a short biography of Joseph Van Oost (1877-1939). He was “a musician, writer and missionary in Inner Mongolia” where he spent most of his life : from 1902-1912 and from 1914-1929. Thereafter, for health reasons, he was obliged to return to Belgium, where his talents as researcher, writer and musician found expression in extensive published works (the titles of which are listed at the end of the book).
- 5 After an introduction setting out the seven themes of her research, the book takes the form of seven chapters, in which Heylen introduces, gathers together and annotates those passages of the *Chronicle* relevant to each of her themes. First she describes the extremely harsh climatic environment (1. *The Climate, Praying for Rain in the Desert*) in seasonal order : the intense cold of winter and the torrid summer heat (temperatures ranging from -40°C to +40°C, p. 11), constant drought and therefore poor harvests, wind and dust, earthquakes. There follows an introduction to local beliefs and customs (2. *Chinese Beliefs and Customs, Dragon Kings, Selling Daughters, Money, and Death*), in which the extracts from the *Chronicle* are arranged in a twin progression, following the calendar (traditional customs from the New Year through to the Mid-Autumn Festival) and the milestones of personal life (marriage, family life, death, funerals) and social life (the importance of money, deviancy, crimes, punishments). In this double context, climatic and social, the writer presents the life of the missionaries (3. *The Scheut Mission in the Ordos, Missionaries in the Field*) in which their difficulties (due to their being so few in number) are described in detail, as well as their apostolic and pastoral methods, the demands of cultural accommodation and all that, for a time, in the middle of a plague epidemic. Still worse was to come (4. *Protecting the Flock, Looting Soldiers, and Political Bandits*) : the constant threat posed by the political disorder (the War Lords) and social upheaval (the vicious circle of greed and corruption) of the time. The years covered by the *Chronicle* are those following the birth of the Republic and its attendant troubles (5. *China in Transition, Politics and Intrigues*). It is extraordinary that, despite his isolation and the scarcity of his sources of information, Joseph Van Oost was able to record so many echoes of the political manoeuvring and the power struggles going on at the centre. Echoes not only of these historical developments but also, in (6. *Towards a Uniform China : Bureaucratic Reforms*), of the efforts made by the new rulers to put in place administrative reforms (basic taxes, new currency and, above all, the campaign against opium production). A final chapter (7. *International Relations, War, Diplomacy and Railroads*) brings together all those passages in the *Chronicle* that situate its author’s observations within the world context—the after-effects of the First World War and the Versailles Treaty (April 1919)—without which the local narrative would lose much of its historical resonance. A conclusion follows—quite short : one page !
- 6 Curiously, the book offers in appendix a list of the proverbs cited in the *Chronicle* (Chinese characters, Pinyin and Debesse Romanisation, the Debesse Romanisation used by Joseph Van Oost, with French and English translations) arranged in three categories : climate, customs and mythology ; a glossary (Pinyin, Debesse and Chinese characters) ; a list of Joseph Van Oost’s publications ; a selection of bibliographic references and an index.
- 7 This long study certainly merited an introduction. In it, Heylen accounts for her aims and her choice of methodology. Her work is in line, firstly, with the efforts of

contemporary historians to reassess the contributions made by peripheral testimony (personal diaries, chronicles and so on) to analysing and understanding the past. To this end, the writer places the *Chronique Du Toumet-Ortos* in the *Zeitgeist* of the time : explorers and missionaries did contribute, by reporting their sometimes critical observations, to the knowledge of the world needed both for Western expansion and for Christian reflection on the “missionary” undertaking. Then, presenting the *Chronicle*, the writer explains her choice of methodology : with a view to clarity, and to avoid the inevitable repetitions within any text written with the passing of months, even of days, the writer chooses to arrange, under the seven headings mentioned above, the most significant extracts from Van Oost’s writing. An attentive reading of the book leaves one in some doubt as to the advantages of this choice ; in spite of the introductions and commentaries fleshing out each chapter, the impression of repetition remains quite strong (the same text dated May 31st 1915 is cited twice within a few pages, on p. 122 and p. 130 : is this the effect of inattention—like those unfortunate misprints that this reviewer will not detail ?). While the book does include a few reprints of photographs from the period, with their qualities and defects authentically preserved, we may still seriously regret the absence of any contemporary map of Inner Mongolia, or of the districts where Van Oost worked, to help the reader acquire some idea of the terrain and of the distances involved . . . Such maps might have imparted a better understanding of the context within which so many atrocities took place in that troubled period. A table situating local events against the landmark dates of the birth of the Chinese Republic would also have been invaluable.

- 8 Without such navigational tools, readers will be swept along willy-nilly by the tornado of socio-political troubles boiling up like sandstorms out of the Gobi desert ; they will be left with no wider perspective, no compass, to help them follow and appreciate the growth of the Catholic Church in Inner Mongolia ; yet, was not this the aim of the series within which the book was published ? A sadly unforeseen consequence of Heylen’s chosen methodology is perhaps that her book has done some disservice to Joseph Van Oost’s lengthy *Chronique du Toumet-Ortos*.